

LAEL WOODBURY Convocation Speech

August 14, 2009

I am just overwhelmed my brothers and sisters. I myself have given this award to persons such as Karl Malden and Frank Capra and others. I never dreamed that it would come to me. I thank Dean Jones and the faculty for this honor. I'm especially grateful that I can be with these graduates at this important time of their lives.

I did prepare a brief talk. I'll give you part of it. However, I didn't know about this award until yesterday and I'm filled with memories as I receive and think about it. I knew Franklin S. Harris. I can't say that I knew him well. I saw him and knew who he was. He was president of USU then and I was an ROTC cadet colonel. We created a massive parade of cadets in his honor. And I remember that as he received that military honor this president of the University was dressed in formal morning attire. He wore a cutaway coat, striped trousers, and a stovepipe silk hat. He looked terrific, and I'm honored to receive this award that carries his name. I also knew Gerrit de Jong for whom this building is named. I helped design this building. He was the first dean of this college. He was also my neighbor. I took a class in aesthetics from him – a wonderful teacher. He asked me to give him a blessing in his final hours.

I need to say a word of thanks to my beloved Margaret. This may sound strange to you, but I married Margaret in the Logan Temple about 80 days after I met her. Shortly after we were married we adopted a 6-year old girl who was not genetically related to either of us and that little girl enriched our honeymoon. This December we will celebrate our 60th wedding anniversary. So honey, I thank you for sixty wonderful years; I'm so glad that you took a chance on me. I had only a 9th grade education when we married; I was a first-quarter freshman. Somehow we have just lumbered through the years together. So I'm grateful to her, and to the members of my family who are here.

I move now to the subject of my talk. I speak of essential issues, especially to the artists among us in this hall. Here I define art in the most general and broad sense. When I was a young faculty member, I and others—such as Stephen Covey, Crawford Gates, and Richard Gunn—were called to serve on the general board of the Church MIA. Part of our assignment was to conduct MIA conventions around the United States. Richard and I were assigned to conduct a conference in Spokane, Washington, as I recall. And we had done that and were coming back to Utah. It was in the summer. It was hot and we were in my car. I was driving. We'd come through

Burley and Declo. And then you know from Declo to Tremonton is just an endless desert. And I was driving and I was bored. I was thinking about Tremonton. If we can just get to where it's green and where there's fresh water. When Dick, who had been sitting beside me and had just stirred said, "Hey Lael, look! Look at that! Isn't that the most beautiful thing you ever saw?" And I said, "No Dick. It looks like desolation to me." And he said, "Well, let me help you. You see the road that goes ahead of us is black asphalt, but as it gets a little distance in front of the car, it turns into silver. And it looks like a silver ribbon. This silver ribbon is going forward in front of us and winding gracefully and gently up the hill—that low hill—that lies before us. And then just at the top of the hill it just happens that there is a large, white, wonderful, rich cloud that just tends to frame the field of vision for us and then along the side the road, there are telephone poles that go down the road – pole, pole, pole. Almost like notes on a musical page." But they were old, decrepit, some had fallen down, broken apart and then there would be other poles beyond that. And he said, "Look at that and think about how those forms are related to each other. Isn't that perhaps the most beautiful arrangement of form that you have ever seen?" And I looked and I could see and I could share his vision of beauty in the desolation that I saw. And I thought, "What's happening here? Two extraordinarily intelligent young men are driving along a road here and I am looking at desolation and he is looking at beauty." And it dawned upon me that what happens when we see anything with our eyes or with our soul, the important thing is not what happens in front of us, but what happens behind the eye – in the mind, if you will. And, I thought "I don't want to go through my life seeing desolation. I want to see the beauty that Dick can see." And I know the gospel of Jesus Christ is a very important part of that.

Now this is the second and last point that I would make about my message to you. The 93rd section of the D&C says, "the elements are the tabernacle of God." Don't just write that off. I challenge you, especially the artists, to remember this for eternity. If that is true, and that's what the scripture says, then God is in the elements. If we are in the pursuit of the face of God, if we are searching to find God, which is our assignment through this entire life, we can see his face in the elements. And the smaller the element, perhaps the more truly he is there. If we look into those as we do, that's what we make our art out of – out of sound, out of movement.

Doris Humphrey, the famous choreographer said, "My entire art consists simply of the breaking away from and returning to equilibrium." It can't get much simpler than that and yet

she said that all dances consist of that simple principle. I am awed and I challenge you brothers and sisters to search the elements, to find God there, and you will find a way to present the face of God to those who behold it. Now whenever I talk this way, I get a little static. I spoke about the good things of Richard and the Art Department, but I had a little trouble with the Art Department when I was dean. And when I would talk this way, one of them would come to me and he would say, “Lael, this is not a seminary. I’m not responsible to put the Salt Lake Temple into everything I paint. Mormon cows look just like Protestant cows.” And I had to agree with him, I mean, my fellow artist. How could I dispute him? I said to him, “That may be true. But you behold it with Mormon eyes, and the non-Mormon, not yet having received the covenant, cannot possibly see in that image everything that you behold. When you gaze—even at a miniscule element—you know from your experience in the temple that everything was created spiritually before it was created physically. He cannot possibly see everything that you see there. Every time you look into an element, you, a sensitive and spiritual artist and a covenant child of God, are empowered to see back to the pre-existence.

And so I commend that artistic sensitivity and holy power to you. It’s not Lael telling you this; it’s the scriptures. Do what you will with it. But I commend it to you. I’m so grateful for the Gospel of Jesus Christ that helps me to see, grateful for wonderful faculty members who help me to see, grateful for these wonderful graduates. I am proud of you graduates. I love you. I’m not the star of this gathering today. You are. What a milestone in your life. I join Dean Jones’ blessing upon you and request that you do well with the riches that you have, the riches of the gospel and the riches of the arts. I know a man who says that God himself was an art major. At least, he said, God didn’t build this world with a slide rule or with a chemistry formula. He created it with words—with words—according to lecture seven of *Lectures on Faith*. We know of course that the *Word* is Jesus Christ. But it’s also the spoken word. So I’m thrilled to be with you, thrilled to contemplate these wonderful ideas, thrilled to be with my fellow artists on every level. I testify that God lives and that I feel the spirit of God in this sacred and beautiful gathering. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.